

Tape two, side one:

ER: This is Ellen Rofman interviewing Mina Kalter. This is tape two, side one. Mina, you were telling us about your life in Siberia and the labor camps. Would you please continue?

MK: As I said, somewhere it lasted three months from the end of May until the beginning of September. And the three months of the summer we worked in the forest getting sap out of the evergreen trees. The males that worked there used to cut in the tree, make incisions, to which the sap ran into a small pot that was centered in the middle of the tree. And we used to scrape out with metal scrapers the sap and put into wooden buckets which we carried on a yoke on our back to an assembled point, where we put them into wooden barrels which were taken out sometime in the middle of the night, because we never had any contact with civilian people, except those guards who were guarding the camp.

Nine months of the winter are being spent mostly on cutting down the trees that stopped giving the sap. After three years, the tree begins drying up, and the tree is of no use any more. So the trees had to be cut down. We used to cut them down with hand saws. And, to give you just an idea what a Siberian tree is like, is, if you have three people put together and you join hands, you go around a circle the circumference of this tree. These trees had to be cut by girls with a hand saw.

I think I explained to you previously how much trouble I had with my back, which I injured on my fall from the truck. And, in the winter time especially, I was in agonizing pain. I just couldn't bend that low and sit in the snow. So my bread rations, my shoes, and my winter clothes were taken away. So, as you see, the prophecy of my mother did come true because she said, "Take this shawl, because maybe some time it will save your life." Because when I had to go to chop the ice in order to get a bucket of water out of the creek in the early morning, all I had was the black shawl to cover myself. Well, in 1943, I realized that if I wouldn't try to get some food, to trade something for food, I will not be able to withstand the winter, because I really had nothing to eat. All right, you live; it's true. We were twelve girls in the room, and when one eats and the other is absolutely hungry, you must share a crumb with somebody else. But I felt that this is not a way to do it. Since I had this dress and these few spools of cotton, I said to myself, "There must be people living somewhere, Russians; if it's not ten miles from here it's fifteen miles from here. There must be some villages. There must be a highway somewhere, because I knew that these barrels are taken out of here on horse and buggy. There must be a highway where they go."

We were, our heads were counted every night. Well, the people there, the commanders and all the guards, are very lonesome there. They are there without their families; they have nothing else to do there except to be very bored, or listen to a radio, or get drunk. So when they found it important to get drunk, real good, especially on the weekend, we were counted every evening. But during the working days, they used to come at

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like 9:00, 10:00 at night. Since there was no electricity anyway, we used to have like a small bottle and some kerosene in it. We used to make a wick out of either a piece of old rag or if we had a piece of cotton, make a wick. And that's how we, that's what was the lighting in the whole barrack. So, they used to come in sometimes at 10:00 at night and count us. Saturday, Sunday was the only day except from work. We worked six days a week, not Sunday. So I made up my mind that I'll try to walk out on Saturday evening. I'll still be counted and will be back on Sunday evening for head count again. I didn't know where I'm going to go or what is going to happen. I had no idea, but I had this dress with which I really didn't want to part, because I, somehow, I don't know, I felt that this is still my tie to my past. I didn't want to give it up in the worst possible way. But I knew that I had to. I reached a point where I must give it up if I want to save my body, if I want to live through these severe winters.

ER: Did they give you...

MK: I didn't know; I had no indication how long I'll last here, how long I'll be here. All I was told is that I am a counter-revolutionary; I'm an enemy of the Soviet regime; therefore, I deserve to be here. And I'll never leave here, and I'll be buried under one of these Siberian trees, and this is going to be the end of me because this is all I deserve. All right. The situation was bad enough to begin believing in it, but I still believed there is a God somewhere and that He'll guard us, that regardless of what they tell me I still had enough faith in me and enough love for my family that I said, "If they survive, they would expect me to do the same," that I had responsibilities to survive, not just for my own sake, but even for their own sake, because I am sure that whatever they are going to try to do is going to try to do the same thing for me, for my sake.

ER: When you were in this barracks, this camp in the Soviet Union, did they give you blankets? Did they give you clothing?

MK: No. You only had what you brought with you.

ER: And when they took your coat away, you never got it back?

MK: I had nothing. They gave me the shoes, the winter boots; they gave me the winter coat; they gave me a bread ration. But, as I said, no work, no eat. So they took this away from me.

ER: Were there any children?

MK: Yes. There were families with children.

ER: Was there any kind of schooling for these children?

MK: No, nothing.

ER: Did they make the children work?

MK: No. Not small children. They were supposed to give us bread every day, once a day. But they found it more profitable to sell the flour on the black market and the other ingredients that went into the bread. So, they used to bring bread like once in two days and sometimes once in three days. To whom can you complain? There's nobody to complain to. You can only cry to God. So we used to go out, well, of course in the summer time, in the spring, in the fall; there used to be some wild berries in the woods, and

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we used to break out of the, this ground. We had here these weeds on our lawn. They look like garlic. We used to dig this out of the ground, chop it up and cook it, boil it in hot water. That used to be the soup that we ate.

ER: During this time, you had no idea what was going on in Europe.

MK: I had no idea, but in 1943, there were, we heard rumors. Sometimes you heard the guards talking that people are coming back wounded from the war. So, we knew already there's a war going on. That was in 1943. We had no access to radio, newspapers, nothing, absolutely nothing. We lived like just the animal in the field. Nothing. We used to say our prayers early in the morning.

ER: This whole time, really, your faith in God is what sustained you.

MK: Absolutely.

ER: You didn't lose your faith.

MK: Never. Under any circumstances. I never lost my faith in God. In 1943, as I explained to you, in winter, I felt that I must give up what I had. I took these two spools of cotton that I have left and this dress, and put on this shawl. I had no shoes, so my neighbor loaned me a pair of shoes that belonged to her ten-year-old little boy. I didn't realize it, the shoes are a little tight. I did realize they're tight, but I didn't feel that it would be that bad. So I put on the shoes and I walked out. It just so happened that on this particular night, he came in at 1:30, woke us at 1:30. The snow was deep—this high. He knocked on the door. And we had to push the door from the inside because he couldn't open it by himself from the outside. So we pushed it from the inside, and he pulled it from the outside. Finally, he came in, dead drunk. With a flashlight he counted us what everybody's in. I already was in bed in my clothes just waiting to get out as soon as he leaves. The minute he left, I walked out of the barracks, and I walked out into the snow. There's no path; there's no highway. Which direction should you take? You can not see anything except this white snow and the tops of the trees. And you say to yourself, "Dear God, where should I go; which direction should I take?" And somehow, something told me: "Go here." I walked for about seven or eight kilometers, which is five miles, and I have reached a secondary highway. I came over there and my feet were hurting terribly. I said to myself: "Something is happening with those shoes. Let me take them off. What is going on?" When I wiped the snow off my feet and my shoes, I realized that the stockings are stuck to my foot, and I have put my finger as much as I could, and there was blood all around me inside; all my skin was rubbed off. I was in such agonizing pain that I didn't proceed walking any farther. I said, "Let me just sit down for a few seconds and try to rest. And then I'll proceed going. If there is a highway, there must be some villages here; maybe there is somewhere a school where I can trade this dress for some food or something, a teacher or doctor." I sat down on a stump of a tree. I sat down and I fell asleep. I fell asleep in 45 degrees below zero.

ER: How did you withstand the cold? You didn't freeze to death.

MK: I didn't freeze to death. No. A human being can endure an awful lot. We don't know our strength, really, until we are faced with a crisis. And then I feel that there

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is still this hidden resource in a person, that he uses in a time of trial when he really needs it, especially when he believes in God, and when your faith is still with you, you find the source of strength to go on.

I sat down on top of this tree, and I fell asleep, and then finally I heard some bells. I couldn't understand where are they, how come I hear bells? Is it possible that I'm dead? You know, when you are a child, you read all kinds of general stories that you go to heaven, and there are angels with bells, and you hear all kinds of things.

Somebody pulled me by my arm. When I opened my eyes there was a young Russian, a young man with a horse, and the horse had bells on its neck. These were the bells I heard. He had passed me, but he came back. He came back because he was very intrigued—everything was very white, but there was like a circle of black around, in the middle. He said, "Let me take a look, what this is?" When he came over, he saw me sitting there, asleep. He took me by my arm and asked me, "What are you doing here? Don't you know that this is a death sentence to fall asleep in this snow, this cold?" I said to myself, "Well, here, I am finished. What is a Russian, what is he going to do with me? He knows who I am." Although I spoke Russian pretty well by then, but still the accent was still there. He knew right away, looking at my clothes. He knew I wasn't Russian. I didn't answer. I was shivering. He said to me, "Don't worry. I'm not going to do anything bad to you." First of all, I was a young girl in the middle of nowhere. He was a young guy. I didn't know what he was going to do there with me; if he would kill me nobody would even know. He said, "What do you want to do? Where are you trying to go?" I said, "I have a dress I would like to trade you for some food." He said, "O.K., I'll take you; there is, 18 miles from here, there is a small hospital; there is a school. I'll put you up on the horse. I'll take you there. You'll be able to trade your food there, and I will even take you back."

I said to myself, "Well this is only an angel from heaven." I mean, I just couldn't believe it. It was just like a miracle. He said to me the only reason he stopped is because from my breathing, you know the snow melted here on this black shawl; and that's how he noticed the black circle around me. By that he was intrigued. There again, you see why I am...

ER: That the shawl saved your life.

MK: Stupid enough to believe in these things. Because I have a fear of it myself. He took me to this hospital; was not a hospital, it was more like an infirmary. They didn't have any beds. But they helped people with different small problems. There was a young lady, maybe 21 or 22 years old, a gorgeous young woman. I said to myself, "My God, what did she do to deserve this fate, to be in a place like that? She probably wasn't a very good Communist or something. She must have done something to be sent there."

They could not take the shoes off because they were frozen to my feet. In order to save my skin, not to lose my legs, they had taken a knife, and cut the shoes off with my skin, together. They had no bandages. She took an old sheet, ripped it in strips; she put on some salve. She said to this young man, "Don't worry, you can leave, and I will put her

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on a sled and take her back,” because she thought it would be too traumatic for me to ride a horse 35 miles. “I’ll put her on a sled, and I’ll take her back where she belongs.” He left.

She gave me for this dress three sacks with planting potatoes, tiny ones, little ones, to be planted. She gave me some seeds to plant cucumbers and carrots. She said, “Keep this and in spring when the weather will get warmer, you can plant it right in front of your barrack,” and then bandaged my legs, my feet, and put me in a sled, and in the evening around 6:00 I was back in my barracks. I would never have been able to be back. Never. She brought me back. I left. She didn’t want to go all the way to the barrack, but 3/4 mile, before you could see the barrack, she left me there. I trotted somehow back to the barrack, and the girls came out and helped me carry these sacks. Some of the potatoes, those that were larger, we ate. Look, you’re hungry, regardless of how much you want to keep it, you know, to plant. Still, you can not resist all that temptation. We ate the larger ones. The little ones, we planted in the spring. Each one of us had a special place where they work, a special part of the forest. We planted our potatoes there. I don’t know whether you believe or not. Never, ever would anybody dare to steal anything which was really the most remarkable thing. Nobody stole something that belonged to somebody else. Under all these circumstances, all the hunger, all these horrible conditions, people were still human enough to know that what is not yours you can not have. Of course we shared everything with the other girls. But thank God, God was good to us that we could, you know, from spring to spring, plant these potatoes every year, and each potato must have weighed three pounds. I have never seen potatoes like this in my life, because the soil is black and very fertile.

ER: When were they harvested?

MK: They were harvested in the beginning of September.

ER: Amazing.

MK: What really, you know, we hear now that the Russians have to buy wheat from us, and they have to buy other staples. They are hungry. They don’t have anything there. The only reason is not just because the soil is bad. The soil is absolutely fantastic there. The reason is there’s no private property. People don’t work for themselves, and when a farmer doesn’t work his own fields and he can’t get anything out of it, why should he work when everything goes to the government?

In March 1945, I was given the only piece of mail I received in four years there, that I am a Polish citizen and at the end of the war I can leave and go back to Poland.

ER: You had some idea at this time what was going on?

MK: We already by then had some idea, yes. When we found out little by little things began leaking out, the soldiers began coming back, the wounded soldiers that have returned from the front, and they lived in the villages around, not far from us. This will be the first place, the one that I discovered. And the people used to go out when I told them there are villages there, “Why don’t you go if you have something? You have a ker-

chief, you have a pair of shoes, you have a spare sweater, you have anything, whatever you have, go, try to find a village. You can make it in a day.”

ER: Did you know what had happened to the Jews?

MK: Yes. Those soldiers that did come back knew already what is happening. They were in Poland. They were in Russia. They were on the fronts and knew what is happening. So of course it was very heartbreaking. But we wanted to come back; regardless, we want to go back home to see who is left, who survived, and whether we can build a home again in our homeland, which was my homeland for the last almost 500 years my forefathers came to Poland.

By then I already knew my husband. We went into the Registration office. There was no, we weren't married of course in the Jewish custom, because there was nobody there to marry us.

ER: Did you know him before the war?

MK: No. He was there also, sent like I was.

ER: Siberia?

MK: Yes. We were married according to the Russian rules, because you can not get a paper testifying that you're married if you don't go through this charade. We had to, on our own, walk close to 100 miles to the railroad station, get on a train. We had to pay our own way to get up on a train. And since my husband is a watchmaker, he didn't have any tools, because all the tools of the trade, no matter what trade you had, were taken away from you. So we used to go from village to village, and he used to ask, "Is there a clock that you need fixing?" People had cuckoo clocks and different kinds of old clocks. So he used to have like, get some cottonseed oil or whatever, and he used to oil the clocks.

ER: Is this in Siberia?

MK: This is Siberia. It's very close to the Arctic Circle because in the beginning we couldn't sleep at all. It was "day". At night it was almost as day as daylight. But a person gets used to an awful lot of things. They have to. We made enough money; he used to fix clocks and I used to knit sweaters. They had homemade wool. They used to make the wool on these, what do you call these, whatever. So I used to knit sweaters and that's how we got enough money, made enough money to get up on the train and go to Poland. I remember on the border, on the Soviet-Polish border, they had looked through everybody's documents, because there were some Russian-Jewish girls who married Polish young men in order to get out of Russia, and everybody had to have a document. They wanted to make sure that their people didn't escape with us together.

I happened to be in the car that was plopped up in the middle of the border. And I said to my husband, "We are going to stay here. They're not going to let us go because, see, these people are already in Poland, and we are still considered like being still in Russia. They probably are going to cut the train in half. We are going to be stuck here." But thank God, they did let us go. We went on the train into Poland. We told ourselves, "Where are we going to go? Should we go to your hometown?"

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ER: Did you have any kind of plan of attack?

MK: Nothing. The only thing that we wanted to do was go first to our hometown and see whether there's anybody there. Well on the train, which was already a passenger train on the Polish side, we had heard on the train what's going on in Poland, that the anti-Semitism is just as it was before.

ER: This was when in 1945?

MK: This was in June, 1945. And the anti-Semitism was just the same as before, and they can not forgive the Jews who did survive. They can not forgive them for their survival. And in the small towns there are no Jews at all in the small towns. Those Jews who did survive are centering in major and larger cities. In my husband's hometown, they had fourteen, thirteen young men and a girl that did survive as partisans. They had settled in his hometown in one little small house. In the middle of the night they threw a grenade into the house, and thirteen of them got killed. And one had his legs chopped off out of the fourteen.

So I said he thought that maybe he would like to go home because they were quite wealthy. They had a big jewelry store; they had a lot of gold in the walls, you know, buried jewelry, gold. And I said, "No, I don't care, no gold and no jewelry is worth to me anything. I don't want to go to your hometown. I don't want to go to the small towns. Let's go to the city of Szczecin, which was on the Baltic Sea in northern Poland in the area that was annexed from Germany [German: Stettin]. We were in Szczecin for a few weeks because there was an office there of the Joint Distribution Committee. They had big blackboards out there where family members were looking for other family members, friends were looking for friends. "Did you see this one? Did you see that one? Have you seen this one?" For a couple weeks, we have walked every day to see these blackboards and looked for a sign of somebody, but there was nobody there.

ER: You didn't go back to your hometown.

MK: No, I did not go back to my hometown. There was not one Jew in my hometown. Not one. Finally, after close to three weeks, I came in and there were the two names of my brothers who were in the displaced persons camp in Berlin in the American zone. So, we have decided to just make enough money to take us over the border, because we had to go legally [Most likely she means *illegally*. -ed.] across the German-Polish border. There were some unscrupulous people who were taking you in trucks, you know, that charged \$20 for a person. Twenty dollars then was a lot of money. We stayed there long enough to make \$40.

As soon as we had the \$20, were long, I don't know, have you seen the old twenty dollar bills? A long \$20 bill. We had these two twenty dollar bills, and we got up on a truck and went across the Polish-German border. We were stopped twice by the Poles, once by the Russians. We had to bribe them with watches and stuff, whatever people had. And then we all, there were close to 45 of us on the truck, and then we came to Berlin, everybody, you know. We chipped in, each of us, so much and so much, to buy for the

person whatever they had lost. One man gave them a gold pocket watch with a chain. We had to buy that and replace it.

So, we came to Berlin; there were my two brothers. Thank God they did survive. My husband is the only survivor in his family. He has absolutely nobody except one cousin, one cousin in Israel. We were in Berlin from August 1945 to the middle of 1948 when the Russians closed the border in Berlin. Whenever they had any problems with the United States or with the Allies, they used to close the borders from Berlin, and nothing could be delivered to us, no fuel, no food, nothing. Everything had to be air-lifted. The barracks that we lived in in Berlin were just absolutely, the conditions we lived in in Berlin were just absolutely inhumane. They were summer barracks for S.S. troops. They were training there, and they were not equipped for the winter. Before we came in, apparently, they put some radiators in, but the hall, the openings between the boards were so big that the snow used to drift into the rooms. We had only electricity and heat two hours a day. And, generally, survivors married and created families, because each of us wanted to have something to hold on, something of our own, something to make us believe that we can still continue, that we can go on, not to give Hitler a posthumous victory, to show him that the few Jews that did survive are going to die out and there are going to be no Jews any more. [meaning: they wanted to show him that the few Jews that did survive are *not* going to die out, and that there *would* still be Jews. -ed.] We wanted to be needed; we wanted to be loved; we wanted to have something and somebody, regardless of the conditions we lived in. So, the two hours of heat a day had to be [unclear]. What could you do in the two hours? Should you warm up, make some formula for the baby? Should you warm up some water to wash some diapers? I had six diapers, as God is my witness, when my baby was born. I bought an old sheet, which I ripped up in six pieces, and these were the diapers that I had for a baby.

When the baby was three months old, he developed double pneumonia since there was no heat. I was told that I must place him in a German hospital, because there was no hospital in the camp. There was only an infirmary. I must place him in the care of Germans. I went to the hospital; I saw the chief of pediatrics section which was a woman. I looked at her and I said, "My God, I am not going to leave my baby in her care," because when you heard what the guards and the doctors were, in the women's camp, that's exactly what she looked like to me, very straight, up, erect, blond-reddish hair, pulled straight, with a bun here in the back, tall.

She said to me, "Well, you have to leave the baby here. It's going to be your responsibility if the baby dies. You have no medication. You have no conditions. Here he'll be able to have a crib; he'll be able to have heat." I said, "I'll think it over." I came back and we sat and talked over what should we do? We decided we will keep the baby with us. Whatever happens, it's going to be God's will; if God wants him to survive, at least I'll know that I didn't put him in their care, God forbid, and they did something to him. As the case was, before 1948, before we left Berlin, this woman was tried for crimes in the camp that she served. My intuition was right. We had to keep him up for five weeks,

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erect, in erect position, day and night, so his lungs wouldn't become water-logged. There was no medication. There was nothing except maybe a...

ER: Did you have any supplies from the Americans?

MK: No. Just aspirin. There was no medication; there was nothing available in those years. Thank God, he did survive. In 1948, when they decided to ship us out of Berlin due to the fact that we couldn't, they couldn't supply us by air with all the necessities, because there was a kitchen where they gave us soup once a day; they gave us bread, in the morning, coffee, bread, and in the evening, soup and again a piece of bread and some vegetables. This was the first time we saw cans, canned vegetables, canned potatoes, canned peas; couldn't get used to eating that, but when you're hungry, you improvise, you eat.

In 1948, we were sent to another camp, not far from Landsberg, where the Nazis were tried for crimes against the Jews. In 1948, when Israel became independent, that was already before we were sent out of Berlin, my two brothers decided to go to Israel, for quite obvious reasons. Because they wanted to live in a Jewish country, where they will have a country of their own, where a Jew will never be afraid to defend what's rightfully his, to carry a rifle, and work his own fields, and support his country, and defend his family and his country. My husband felt that we maybe, that maybe it will be easier for us to be established in the United States, because I had an uncle here in Philadelphia, who told me that as soon as the United States opens its doors for refugees, the United States still doesn't let people in. They didn't let them in before; they didn't let them in during the Holocaust; they still didn't open doors for them after the Holocaust when they had no where to go. This is the magnanimous President.

Tape two, side two:

ER: It's important you tell the whole story; it really is.

MK: We came here in 1950, as I said before, and it was very hard in those days to find an apartment, especially, because nobody wanted to rent an apartment to refugees. That's what we were called, refugees, and especially when you had a child, you had another strike against you. Not only did I have a child, but I was pregnant with my second child. My boy was four, and I was pregnant; I was seven months pregnant with my younger son when we came to this country. So, finally, it took us six or seven weeks to find an apartment. I knew I had to find something because when the baby comes, I had to have a place of my own. I didn't want to burden my uncle and my aunt with staying there with a small baby, because my aunt was a very ill woman, very sick. And, we did finally find this apartment on the third floor in Strawberry Mansion, the area that was called Strawberry Mansion. Thank God, my husband did find a job. He used to make \$40 a week, but we were very happy that we came finally to a country where we were not afraid to live as Jews, and be Jews, and not to worry to say that we are Jews. And, I was faced very early into our coming here to the United States, it was a question, to having to answer the question to my son, what is a grandfather and what is a grandmother, because he was invited to a birthday party of another little boy in the neighborhood. When he came back, he said to me, "Mommy,"—he couldn't speak English then; it was only three months after we came here—he spoke to me in German, and he said to me, "*Was ist ein grandma, und was ist ein grandpa?*" — "What is a grandmother and what is a grandfather?" I'm sitting and thinking, what should I tell this child? Should I come out with the truth, or should I just beat around the bush? But I decided right there and then that I want my children to know, I want them to know where they are coming from; I want them to remember what they are, who they are, and not to be afraid or ashamed to be Jews, because we certainly have nothing to be ashamed of. Let those who discriminated and killed our six million people, and the world who didn't do anything about it, let the world feel, in their own hearts, their complicity, and where their priorities should have been in those years of the Holocaust.

So, it was in the beginning very hard for my child to understand, but gradually they began growing up. They did understand, and I took them the first time to Israel in 1963 for my younger son's *Bar Mitzvah* because all the family I have was there, and I could not afford it before. For thirteen years we scraped the penny to a penny, even from the \$40 a week, I still saved a couple of dollars, put a stone on it, and saved a penny to a penny because eventually, we planned to make the *Bar Mitzvah* of my son in Israel. And we went in 1963.

This was the first time that I took my children to Yad Vashem. My little one was only four years old. When she came in there, she had a little bit an idea what it's all about, because I did explain to her before she came in. She was four; a child of four doesn't understand fully, but the background, and we were talking about it at home very

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freely. The children heard it. We were associating with other survivors and belong to the survivor's groups, so we had lots to share. It was common knowledge to my children. We talked about it. When we went to the park with mothers of other children, we talked about it. We talked about common experiences, about our past. The children knew. And I felt, especially now, I feel that it was very beneficial that we didn't hide the truth from our children, that at a very early age, I made them understand what the whole thing was all about. And, thank God, they didn't have any psychological problems. It didn't affect them adversely in any way. We taught them self-reliance, but never hate or bigotry. They have to make up their mind on their own, where their future is going to take them, how they feel, and how they want to treat other people, which, I know that they are beautiful. All three are very beautiful human beings, thank God. I am very proud of my children. The Lord was really very good to us. I have three very educated, wonderful children, terrific human beings, good kids. They get along with one another, they get along with us. We never had any psychological problems, thank God, to contend with. We never had any problems with them when the world was going on, through the trauma of drugs, and colds, or things like that. So I'm very grateful to God that we were spared all this. And I hope that the background that we gave them, that's going to extend for their life.

ER: Are they active in the second generation groups?

MK: No, they are not. My oldest son doesn't live in Philadelphia; he lives in New York. My youngest son, unfortunately, is not active. I tried, but...

ER: Well, I guess it fulfills needs for some, and perhaps he just doesn't need that.

MK: True. As far as my daughter is concerned, she is not home now. She's in medical school in Kansas City, and I'm finding out about things about which I was very worried when she left. I could hear at home, she sees what has happened here, how we celebrate Passover and other Jewish holidays, the tradition that is upheld in our home. She called me after *Selichot* [midnight service the Saturday evening preceding Rosh Hashanah] this year on Sunday morning. We generally talk at least twice or three times a week. But she called me on Sunday morning, and she had tears in her eyes. I said, "Honey, what happened?" Right away, you feel, God forbid, maybe a car accident, maybe something happened. Maybe she's sick. She said, "Mom, did you watch *Selichot* services from this-and-this synagogue in New York?" I said, "Yes, I did." She said, "You know, I watched it, too. I cried; it made me feel so good." They were not overly religious.

ER: I think, as they get older...

MK: She came to school, Kansas City, the Midwest, there are not too many Jews. And most of the Jews that did live in Kansas City moved to the Kansas side of town, the line between Missouri and Kansas. They most of them live in Overland Park. So, when she came to school, there were not too many Jewish students. She found out later there are three Jewish girls in her class. But, she is wearing a tiny little gold Star of David that my brothers gave her when we came to Israel in 1963, when she was four years old. She has never taken it off her neck. I remember once, she was taking a shower, and the chain

From the collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive.

broke, and it fell into the bathtub. When she came to her room, she realized she doesn't have this chain with the little *Magen David*, tiny, it's as big as half a penny; it means an awful lot to her. She cried. I said, "Look, honey, let's run over, maybe it's still there." It was in the tub, before the water had a chance to flush down the drain. It was like an omen to her. She has never taken it off. And once she wore a blouse open, and this girl saw the chain on her neck and she said to her, "Rachel, are you Jewish?" She said, "Yes, I am Jewish." You'd be surprised how many 'Rachels' are non-Jewish. It became a very popular name. Little by little, they started talking. She said, "My parents are Holocaust survivors," and she started telling them about the past of our people, what our Jewish people went through. They had never heard of it. They never knew what the Holocaust was all about. They never knew what Jews, what six million Jews went through.

She asked me once to send her a list. So, I took a list of JCRC, with books that the kids can read. So, I feel that she is fulfilling some kind of a function in [unclear]. Last year, she went, they had a Holocaust memorial service. She went to the memorial service at the Jewish Federation there. It was very meaningful. She said to me, "Mom, it gave me a perspective. It really made me think a lot, and I'm very happy that you gave me this background as a child." If you have the time, of course she is very busy, in medical school, so overworked. So I feel that with her, I wouldn't have any problems. She will continue, she knows her place, she knows where she's coming from.

It just reached a point, I don't know whether it's fortunate or unfortunate, my children want to go back to Poland. They have been bugging me for the last two years especially since I had my open-heart surgery. They said, "Mom, I think it's time that, you know you're not well, and we would like to go." I said, "How about if you'll go by yourselves?" They said, "No, it's not going to have the same meaning. It's not going to be the same if you're not there. We want you to show us the home, even if the house isn't there, even if somebody else lives there, where it is. We want to [see] the cemetery. We want to see the synagogue that was burned down, even if the ground is only there, even if they built a church there." I don't know what is there. I don't know what to expect, even if the cemetery is there. I have absolutely no idea.

ER: Will you do that?

MK: Well, I'm thinking about it. I don't know. Sometimes I have second thoughts, sometimes, that maybe I shouldn't go, because I really don't want to go with my heart. If I do go, it's only because they want to go. I feel so much in my heart that I don't know how I can face the Poles there, how I can face the neighbors there. But, maybe we will have to make up our minds and go, because I see that it means an awful lot to them, and they want it. They want to go to Auschwitz; they want to go to Warsaw to see where the Warsaw Ghetto uprising was; they want to see the big synagogue in Krakow, so I don't know. We are thinking. We haven't made any plans. We are thinking about it, especially my husband's hometown, there is a rabbi buried, a sage, and an awful lot of very religious people from New York; the Hasidim, go only for three days to pray on the

grave of this particular rabbi. It's in his hometown. So, that's why he wants to go. So, maybe we will. Maybe we'll think about it some more, and maybe we will go.

ER: I want to thank you very much. This was very painful and difficult, but...

MK: Well, painful as it may be, I feel that, hopefully, it will serve a purpose. I feel that it has to be done, because as long as the survivors are here, they can tell their own stories which, God knows, are true and must be believed. We can remind a future generation what this unfortunate era between 1933 and 1945 was for Jews in Germany, and in Poland, and the countries surrounding Poland, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, and Hungary, and in what manner six million Jews were eliminated from the face of the earth. I know Hitler also destroyed millions of other people but for totally different reasons. Six million Jews died the death that they did just because their misfortune was to be born to Jewish parents; that was their only crime they have committed.

ER: Thank you, Mina.

MK: You're welcome.